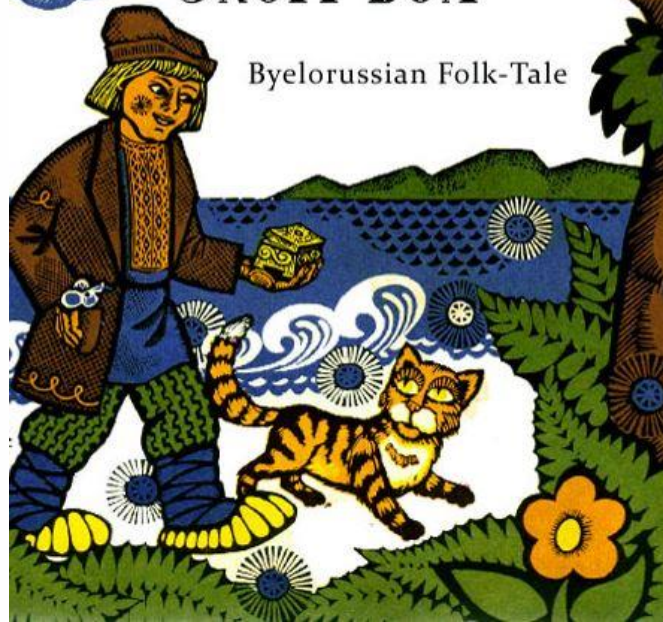


Translated by M. Mintz, Illustrated by P. Sviridov

VOUG AND THE GOLD SNOFF-BOX

Byelorussian Folk-Tale





There was once upon a time an orphan boy Yanka, the son of a forester. His mother and father were both dead, and he had no relatives whatsoever. So it came to pass that he lived alone in the forest in his parents' hut. To make life a bit more cheerful for himself, he took in a motley Cat to live with him.

The Cat grew attached to him. Wherever his master went, he went too.

One day Yanka went to gather some wood. The Cat, as was his custom, followed in his wake. Yanka gathered some twigs, tied them up and carried the bundle home while the Cat dragged one small dry twig after him.

Yanka grew tired, sat down on a stump and thought how hard it was for him to live in this world. He let out a heavy sigh and under his breath said:

"Oh! Oh!"

The words had scarcely escaped him, when an old man wearing a long beard, hopped out from under the stump.

"Tell me, young man, why you called me?"



Yanka took a look at the old man and said in a frightened voice:

“No, grandad, I didn’t call you!”

“What do you mean you didn’t call me?” the old man said. “I am not hard of hearing! Twice you repeated my name, Ouhg, Ouhg... Now tell me your wish and you will have it!”

Yanka thought a moment and said:

“I have no wishes. But I am very hungry. If you have some bread, could you give me a piece?”

Ouhg darted back under the stump and after a while brought out a piece of bread and a bowl of cabbage soup.

“Here you are!” he said. “Eat!”

The orphan boy Yanka ate his fill, fed his Cat, and bowed low to the old man:

“Many thanks, grandad, for the dinner. It’s a long time since I’ve had anything so delicious to eat.”

He threw the bundle of wood on his back and walked off to his hut, a happy lad.

A day passed, then another, and again he felt hungry. Yanka recalled the old man. “I’ll go to him once more and try my luck. Maybe he’ll give me something to eat this time too.” Yanka reached the place where he had seen the old man, sat on the stump and called his name:



“Ouhg!”

The old man hopped out.

“Name your wish, young man!”

Yanka bowed low to him.

“I’m hungry, grandad. You couldn’t give me a piece of bread, could you?”

In the twinkling of an eye the old man brought him a piece of bread and a bowl of cabbage soup.

And so it went on: whenever Yanka wants to eat, he goes to the old man.

But once, instead of the dinner, the old man brought out a gold snuff-box.

“Listen to me, my son,” he said. “Don’t disturb me any more. I’m old already, and it’s difficult for me to bring you your dinner. Take this snuff-box. If you need anything, open it, and my serving-man will immediately appear before you. He will grant you your wishes just as I do.”

Yanka took the gold snuff-box, thanked the old man heartily and ran off to his hut.

At home he opened the gold snuff-box. A little man jumped out from it, but he was not at all like the old man Ouhg. He was a smart-looking, spry young fellow.

Name your wish!” the little man said in a thin voice.

“Something to eat, brother.”

In the twinkling of an eye the little man put a bowl of cabbage soup and a large piece of rye-bread on the table. As for himself, he darted back into the gold snuff-box and locked himself in.

Yanka continued to live in this way until there came the day when he felt he had to go out into the wide, wide world, to see people and to be seen, for he had never been anywhere beyond his forest.

He took his gold snuff-box, called to his Cat and left.

Many a village and many city did he pass through; many were the things that he saw. And one fine day he came to the sea, a sea so blue. And Lo and behold! There on the seashore he sees a tiny silver Fish. A wave must have cast her ashore at a high tide and here she still is. The little Fish is all in a tremble, she beats against a stone, gasps for breath in the baking sun, but no matter how she tries, she cannot make her way back into the sea.

Yanka felt very sorry for the poor little Fish. He took her up carefully and cast her back into the sea.

The little Fish flapped her tail, gulped in some water and came to. She raised her head out of the water and said, speaking in a human voice:

“Thank you, kind fellow, for saving me from certain death. Perhaps there will come a day when I shall be able to help you.”





With these words she went — splash! — back into the water.

Yanka began to laugh:

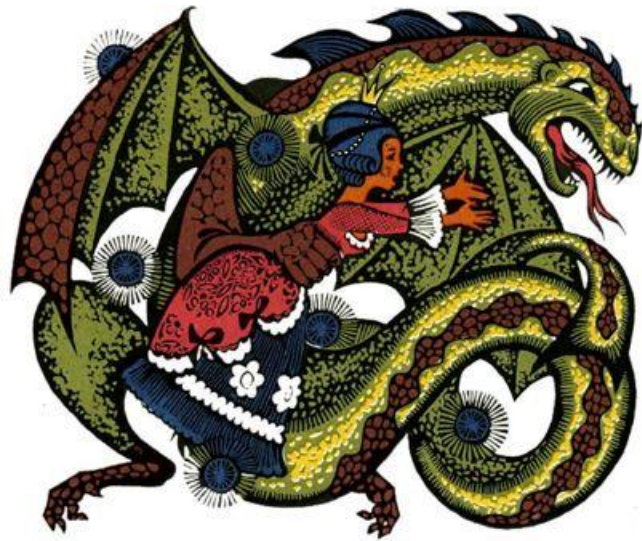
“Whatever can I need your help for, little Fish, when here in my pocket I have a much better servant than you can ever be!” But the little Fish did not hear him.

He continued his trip. There ran out a little grey Mouse from a hole. His Cat pounced, seized her by the scruff of her neck and was about to eat her.

Yanka felt very sorry for the little Mouse. He was the kind of person who had pity for everybody, because he never forgot how hard his own life had been. He picked up the Mouse, patted her gently and put her in his pocket. Then he took out a crust of bread from his bundle and threw it to her.

“Eat!” he said. “You are hungry, aren’t you?”

The Mouse quieted down and began to nibble at the crust.



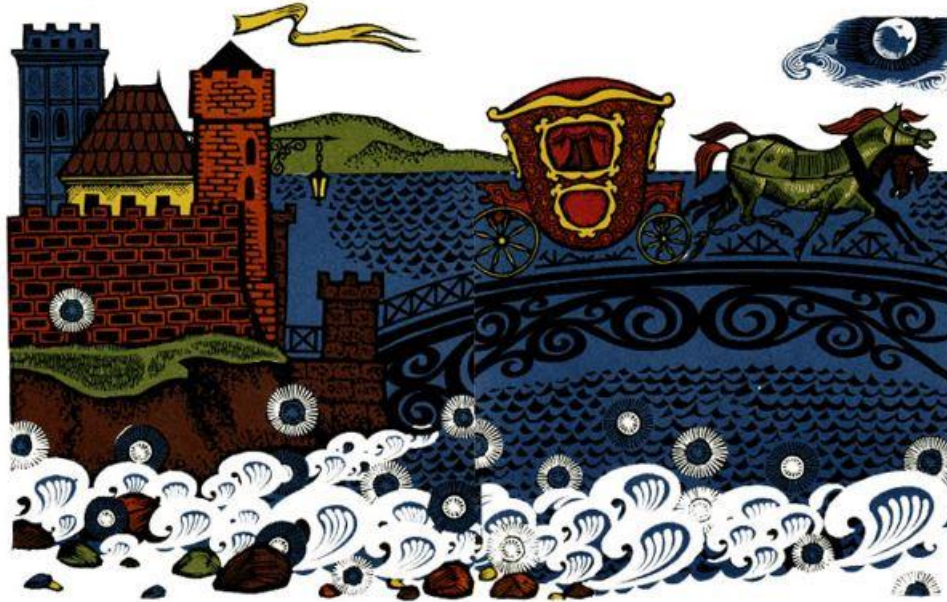
Yanka walked on along the seashore. Evening came on in the meantime — time to look for a place to spend the night in. And behold! High up on a mountain he sees a palace! “That’s not for me!” he thinks. “They won’t let me in there.” And he went on walking. Suddenly he sees a little fisherman’s hut near the sea. Yanka enters the fisherman’s hut and asks whether he can spend the night there.

“Yes, of course you can,” says the master of the house. “You can stay here overnight. It’ll be all the merrier for me.”

They begin to talk. Yanka asks the master of the house:

“Whose palace did I pass by on the way?”

“That palace belongs to the King,” says the man. “The King himself lives there. Not long ago a great misfortune befell him: in the middle of the night a Dragon came flying in, seized his daughter and carried her off to his enchanted island. Neither by sea nor by land has anyone been able to reach it. The King is eating his heart out now. He has let it be known far and wide throughout the land that he will give his daughter in marriage to whosoever will return her to him, and upon his death that man will be heir to his entire kingdom. Many princes and dukes have come here from distant lands, and not one of them has been able to get to the island. The Dragon raises such huge waves that the struggle against them is a hopeless one.”



Yanka thought of his wonderful serving-man in the gold snuff-box, and he said, to the fisherman:

“Please go and tell the King that tomorrow at daybreak he shall see his daughter.”

The fisherman went to tell the glad news to the King, and Yanka was invited to come to the palace. When the King saw Yanka he shrugged his shoulders: “Can it be possible,” he thought, “that such a common fellow can accomplish what so many princes and dukes have failed to do? Simply impossible!” But so anxious was he to see his daughter that he didn’t dare refuse this chance to try his luck once more. So he asked Yanka:

“Is it true, young man, that you wish to make an attempt to deliver my daughter from her prison?”

Yanka bowed to the King and answered:

“Yes, it is, Your Majesty! It is not a lie!”

“Well, but see to it,” the King said, “that by daybreak tomorrow my daughter is back with me in my palace, otherwise I shall have you tortured to death on an iron rack!”

“Alright” was Yanka’s answer. “So be it!”

He left the palace and opened the gold snuff- box. The smart little man darted out and said:

“Name your wish!”



“Do me a favour, brother! Have an iron bridge put up overnight, a bridge that will reach from the King’s palace across to the enchanted island belonging to the Dragon, and have a gold coach and six waiting there. Tomorrow at daybreak I shall go to the island.”

“Alright!” said the little man. “You shall have your wish!”

Yanka returned to the fisherman’s hut and lay down to sleep. At daybreak he awoke and looked out. Lo and behold! There is the iron bridge, reaching from the King’s palace across to the Dragon’s enchanted island, and on the bridge is a gold coach and six, and near the horses is his young serving-man with a whip in his hand.

Yanka came up to his

serving-man, took out the snuff-box, and said:

“Thank you, brother!

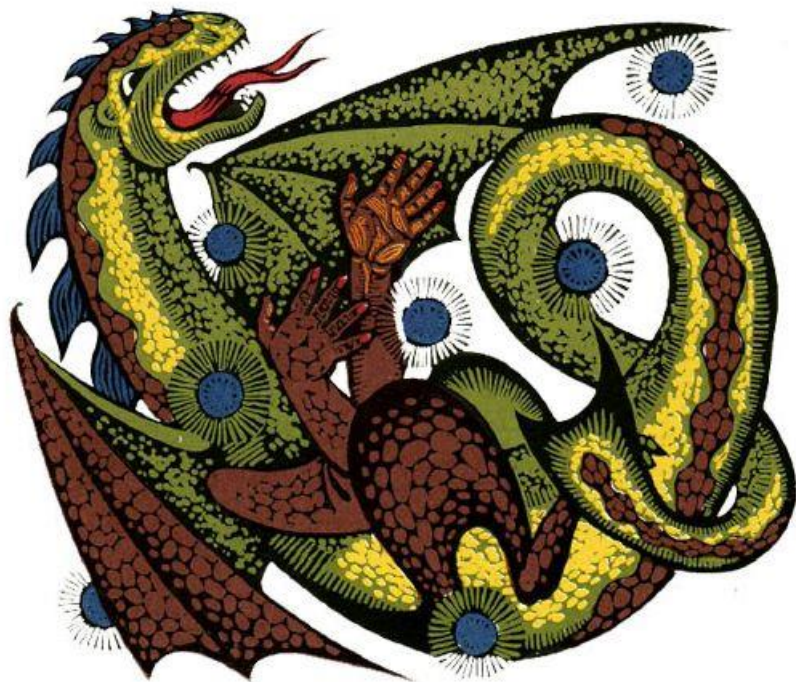
Now you can go and rest. You must be tired.”

The little man gave Yanka the whip, and himself darted into the gold snuff-box.

Yanka took his seat in the coach and sat off to release the Princess. Arriving on the island, he saw an immense dark castle and the Princess looking out of her window in great astonishment. It was such a long time since she had seen anybody at all, the sight of Yanka made her as happy as if she saw her own father again.

“Who are you?” she questions him. “And why have you come here?”

“Don’t ask questions, Your Highness,” Yanka answers. “Quick! Into the coach! To your father’s palace!”



These words made the Princess even happier.

“But I can’t get out through the door! That cursed Dragon is sleeping there. During the night he flies about searching for prey, during the day he lies at the door taking his rest.”

“Then climb out through the window!”

“Afraid to!”

Yanka stretched out his hands:

“Jump!”

The Princess jumped out of the window straight into his arms. Yanka caught her, seated her in the coach and flew with lightning speed to the King’s palace.

Hearing a rumbling, the Dragon awoke, sprang up, looked around — the Princess was gone! Off he went after her so fast the bridge shook under him, his mouth spouted fire.

Yanka turned round, glanced back, — the Dragon in a cloud of smoke was speeding after them. He was almost upon them. Yanka whipped the horses on. They tore forward, laying themselves out. Yanka rushed ashore, took the Princess out of the coach, hid himself from her, opened the gold snuff-box and ordered his serving-man to remove the bridge.

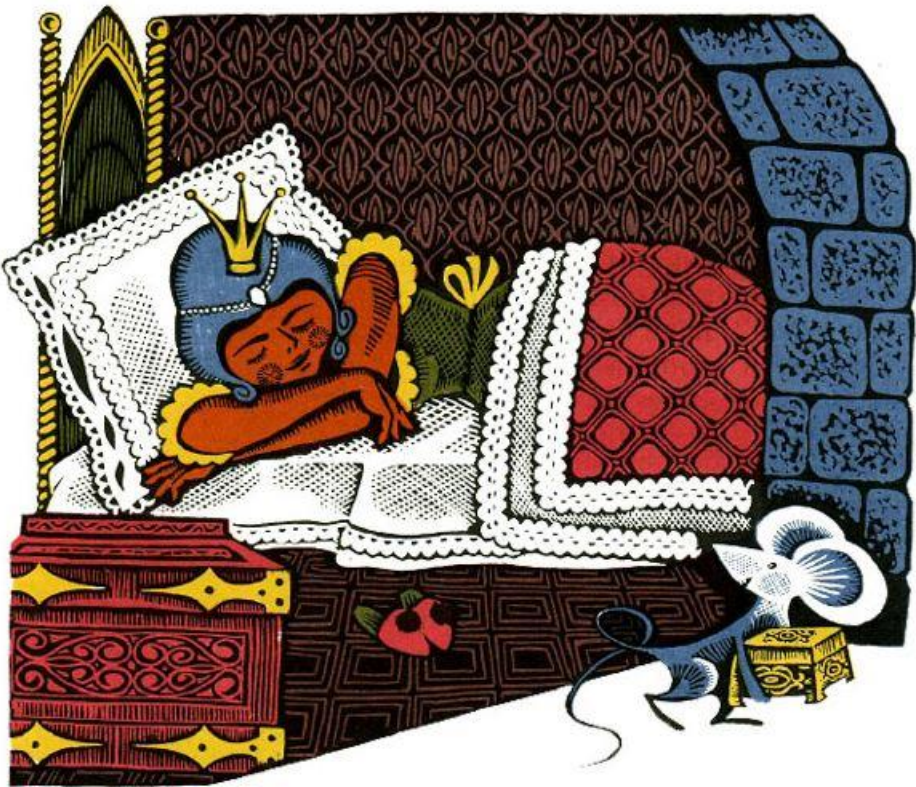
In the twinkling of an eye the little man had the bridge removed, and the Dragon, exhausted, fell into the deep sea and was drowned.



In the meantime the King awoke, looked out of the window — he could hardly believe his eyes; his daughter was approaching the palace! And Yanka was leading her!

The King ran out to meet them, took his daughter in his arms and began kissing her. How happy he was, how glad!

“Well young man,” the King said to Yanka, you have made me very happy. I will, therefore, give you my daughter in marriage and upon my death you shall inherit my kingdom.



The marriage feast was held, and the orphan boy Yanka became the husband of a Princess. Everybody loved him. The Princess alone looked askance at him. The idea that she was the wife of a common fellow was displeasing to her. And there came a day when she began nagging him.

“Tell me, who built you that bridge that you carried me across?”

Yanka did his best to put her off, but it was of no use.

“I shall die,” his wife said, “if you don’t tell me the truth.”

What could he do? Yanka told his wife the truth, and he showed her the gold snuff-box.

“But,” he said, “you must swear that you will never take it in your hands without me.

His wife swore to that, and then she said:

“I wish to live with you in the castle on the island. Tell your serving-man you wish to have a bridge erected.”

Yanka did not begin to argue with her: he opened the snuff-box in the presence of his wife, gave the command to his serving-man and Lo and behold! The bridge was ready. They moved into the Dragon’s castle. Yanka’s wife said:

“Don’t have the bridge removed. We shall use it to visit my father in his palace, or to go wherever else we may wish.”

They had been living in the castle for some time, when one day Yanka decided to go hunting. He took his bow and arrow, and to make the way more cheerful for himself, his Cat and little Mouse, and set off across the bridge.

Hardly had he crossed the bridge and got ashore; than he saw the bridge behind him was gone!

“A miracle, no less!” Yanka thought. Into his pocket went his hand — but the snuff-box was not there! The Cat he had taken, the Mouse he had taken, but the snuff-box he had forgotten..!

Now everything was clear to him. “That’s the oath of a Princess!” Yanka thought to himself. “I took pity on her, rescued her from misery, and she repays me for my kindness with evil. I’ll have to go back to my hut again, and go hungry as before.”

He sat on the seashore and even began to weep, thinking of, his wife’s treachery. Suddenly he felt his Mouse scratching away in his pocket. She stuck out her head and said:

“Why are you weeping, my good man?”

Yanka told her about the misfortune that had befallen him.

“Never mind!” the Mouse comforted him. “We shall find a way out of your difficulty.”

She whispered something to the Cat, then sat on his back, and they swam across the sea. They swam up to the castle. The Cat hid in the orchard while the little Mouse got into the Princess’ bedroom through a crack in the wall.

She sat there a long time trying to spy out where the Princess was keeping the snuff-box hidden. And she did finally see where — in a little wooden casket!

At night when the Princess had fallen asleep, the little Mouse gnawed open the casket, snatched the gold snuff-box, and ran out to the Cat in the orchard.



“I’ve got it!” she said. “The gold snuff-box!”

“Quick! Onto my back!” the Cat ordered! “To swim back!”

With the Mouse on his back, the Cat, snorting, swam on the crest of the waves. They had almost reached the shore when the Cat said to the Mouse:

“You haven’t lost the snuff-box, have you?”

“Of course not!” said the Mouse. “Here it is!”

She held up the snuff-box to show it to the Cat, but could not hold on to it. Flop! went the snuff-box into the sea!

“Oh! You clumsy thing!” the Cat exclaimed. “What have you done?”

He swam ashore, seized the little Mouse, bit his teeth into her neck.

“I’ll choke you to death!”

Yanka saw that and he took the little Mouse away from the Cat. But when he learned what had happened, he again sat on the seashore, the unhappiest creature on earth — so terrible was the loss of the snuff-box for him!

Suddenly a little silver Fish appeared in the sea.

“Why, my man, so sad? Tell me! Perhaps I can help you in some way and thus repay you for having saved me from certain death.”

Screwing his eyes, Yanka looked hard at her and recognized his little Fish.

“Alas!” he sighed heavily. “Great is my loss!”

And he told the little Fish about the trouble he was in. The little Fish listened to his story and said cheerfully:

“Your trouble is no trouble! Here in the sea I have as many snuff-boxes as you can possibly wish for. I will throw them ashore one after another. When you recognize your snuff-box, you can take it, but the rest you will return to me, they are mine.”

The little Fish flapped her tail and dived back into the sea, to the very bottom.

Without wasting a single moment, she began throwing snuff-boxes ashore — silver ones, gold ones, diamond ones. The sight of those snuff-boxes made Yanka’s head go round and round. He began to examine each one in turn very carefully and finally did come across his own. Yanka was so happy. He threw the rest of the snuff-boxes into the sea and shouted to his little Fish:

“Thank you, my dear little Fish! Thanks to you, my troubles are over!

He took his gold snuff-box and started off together with his Cat and his little Mouse to search for better people.